

Commentary

Change in Medical Care Has Come Too Fast

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by Frederick C. Holschuh MD

I have seen the enemy: It is not only disease and suffering but denial of care and disruption of the patient-doctor relationship.

We now save public funds by not offering routine adult dental care, and yet, in the emergency room I see patients daily with dental abscesses and facial infections, often requiring costly antibiotics and/or hospital admissions.

We discontinue programs for alcohol and other drug treatments, and then pay horrendous amounts in money and human suffering for the end results of substance abuse: violence, ravaged minds and bodies, the spread of viral infections and damaged fetal brains.

Prior to the managed-care approach to cost control, it was not uncommon for a young man to drop into an emergency room for pain medication rather than wait for an appointment, just so he could get to the beach sooner; or, for patients to tell me they had changed their disability from "back pain" to "psych" because it was easier to scam the system.

Change was needed, but it is going too far, too fast.

We physicians do not feel that all is lost, even with the horrendous Mainland examples of managed care that is obscene in its denial of benefits and care to patients and the treatment of physicians.

Locally, legislation has passed to allow patients to seek emergency room care when the patient feels it is an emergency, and that provides for protection for the patient in a patients' bill of rights.

We must seek an appropriate balance, never forgetting that the patient must always be the focus.

Managed "fright"

My physician colleagues and I know there have been dramatic, chaotic and sometimes frightening changes in our health care delivery system. For physicians, the "fright" is simply to wake up one morning to find that all of your patients have been taken to some other "provider of care" and that reimbursements will continue to be slashed.

For patients, it is the restrictions on benefits, the denial of care, the inability to see a physician of their choice, and the loss of "connection" with their doctor.

For both patients and physicians, it is frightening to lose control of decision making.

The changes are in large part due to the phenomenon called "managed care" — or what we physicians see more as "managed cost" — much to the detriment of patients.

I believe every patient should have a "choice" of health care delivery system, whether it be closed-panel health maintenance

organization, large multi-specialty clinic or independent private physician. In the recent past, the physician and the patient decided together on care options; now, the decision and choices are taken away by the "payer" or insurance company health plan.

The managed part of health care arose because of abuse and waste in the health care system. Many other sectors of our society also experience abuse and waste but have not been taken care of by the most restrictive and burdensome governmental regulations that we see in the health care industry.

Patients must act

Now thankfully, the patient and the doctor — as the patients' advocate — are challenging the managed care organizations and their counter-productive bottom-line mentality at the expense of the patient.

The only way to bring back true patient-physician decision-making in health care is for our greatest allies, our patients, to demand that it be done.

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